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CHURCH UNION IN CANADA—FROM A PRESBYTERIAN STANDPOINT

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The successful union of four Presbyterian bodies into one church in 1875, and a similar union of four Methodist bodies in 1883 raised the question of an interdenominational union. The arguments in favor of such union are summarized in this article. The attitude of the Presbyterians in the negotiations is outlined. Citations are given from the documentary pronouncements of the Baptists and the Episcopalians, who declined to enter the union.

Just about the time that Matthew Arnold was putting on record his dislike for the "dissidence of dissent" and "the Protestantism of the Protestant Religion," and was asserting that nonconformity was born to separation as the sparks fly upward, some of the denominations in Canada, notably the Methodist and the Presbyterian, were giving signs that no negative word, whether it be "dissent" or "nonconformity," described their real life. In 1875 four Presbyterian bodies were united, and became the "Presbyterian Church in Canada," the product of a steady impulse toward union, uninterrupted except for the echo in Canada of the disruption in Scotland in 1843. In 1883, four Methodist bodies joined together under the name of the "Methodist Church." It is to be regretted that in the religious life of this continent, as well as elsewhere, groups break off from their parent stem with what seems insufficient cause, freedom of worship having its defects as well as its advantages; but it can hardly be true, when all the facts are considered, that there is in Canada any inherent tendency toward division.

The two great unions, that of 1875 and that of 1883, took place in time close to the confederation of the Provinces into the Dominion of Canada in 1867, and share in the spirit of that achievement. In lands so sparsely settled as the British

Colonies then were, union, political and religious, may be said to have been essential. In the churches concerned the effects of union were felt immediately. In the Presbyterian church "a new note was struck, the note of national responsibility."¹ Under this impulse the church entered with enthusiasm upon mission work abroad and in the Northwest, beginning an epoch of expansion which "few would fail to call heroic"; while the record of growth in the Methodist church "tells eloquently in favor of the union of 1883."² It is almost impossible to escape the conclusion that it was the happy experience of these two churches which made a still wider union a credibility.

With this stimulating background negotiations for the larger union of Congregationalists, Methodists, and Presbyterians were cautiously begun more than seventeen years ago. At the very outset the committees appointed by the several churches entertained no greater hope than that of an increased friendly co-operation, especially in the field of home missions; but soon the discussion took on a deeper tone. As early as September, 1902, a committee of the Methodist church had reached the following conclusion:

The time is opportune for a definite practical movement concentrating attention on, and aiming at, the practical organic unity of those denominations already led by Providence into such close fraternal relations.³

This advance was cordially met by the Presbyterian church, which appointed a committee to confer with their Methodist and Congregationalist brethren, and as a result they jointly reached the decision that "organic union is both practicable and desirable." Perhaps it was at this moment that the die was cast. Union committees were thereupon struck by the three churches, and the new and wonderful movement was fairly launched.

¹ *Canada and Its Provinces*, XI, 283.

² *Ibid.*, XI, 310.

³ *Explanatory Statement*. Toronto: Murray Printing Co., p. 6.

It is not necessary to follow the negotiations in detail year by year. Perhaps expectations ran too high at the outset; perhaps obstacles emerged; perhaps opposition had not had time to form. In any case the voyage of union was to be more stormy and uncertain than even its more moderate advocates had calculated. The strongest opposition developed in the Presbyterian church, and came from a section which found it advisable to organize into an association for the preservation of the Presbyterian church. In the Methodist and Congregational churches opposition also arose, but never to the same extent, and it was never formally organized.

It is impossible in a "fierce abridgment" to do even the scantest justice to the arguments of those who opposed union. Perhaps the strongest sentiment found in their ranks is the quite legitimate feeling of pride in the history and work of their own special denomination, and an unpleasant premonition of insecurity and loss of identity. This conservative dislike of change is in its way just, and can rightly claim that arguments in favor of church union must be of the most cogent character. But, in addition to this general aversion to what seems to some to be violent and uncalled-for agitations, there are, one may venture to say, also more special grounds of objection. Methodists desire to be insured against the encroachments of spiritual deadness, Presbyterians against the lowering of the academic standards and a limitation of the right of free inquiry, and Congregationalists against a mechanical church autocracy. Needless to say, these are all real evils, into which any church, united or otherwise, may fall, and the more pronounced is the antagonism to them, the better for the fortunes of the united church.

The arguments in support of union may be summarized as follows:

1. *The argument from expediency.*—Men and money would be saved by union, manses would be more commodious, libraries more complete, congregations larger, and traveling curtailed.

2. *The argument from efficiency.*—Rivalries would diminish, at least within the bounds of the three churches, and proselytizing cease. The number of colleges would be reduced from about sixteen to eight with a marked gain in teaching power.

3. *The argument from the past.*—If the results of previous unions can be used as a basis, a leap forward would be made in all church work, especially in mission enterprise at home and abroad. Publications would have larger circulations and attract higher talent.

4. *The argument from diversity.*—Union, it is urged, is not a compromise, according to which each denomination drops its personal qualities and accepts a weak amalgam, but a union in which all valuable individual features would have fuller scope. The doctrinal independence of the Congregationalists, the religious fervor of the Methodists, and the scholarship of the Presbyterians would all leaven the united body, the new church being enriched by the special gift of each participant.

5. *The practical argument.*—From time to time the sparser populations of the West, little influenced by older communities, and impelled by self-preservation, have already taken matters into their own control, and formed union churches. At present nearly five hundred such community congregations, shaking themselves loose from denominational ties and setting up church for themselves, are dotted thickly over the prairies and are impatiently awaiting union. To preserve these and other groups to the united church is a matter of the first importance.

6. *The race and language argument.*—The foreign, or as we now term it, the "New-Canadian" problem becomes easier to solve. In the provinces of the West, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, and also in New Ontario, the percentage of the non-English varies from forty to forty-five according to the province. Under existing con-

ditions the New Canadians, finding no distinctively Canadian church, may be said to be encouraged to hive off by themselves, and perpetuate on Canadian soil their European exclusiveness. Everywhere in the Northwest can be found little match-box churches built by the New Canadians in imitation of the match-box churches built by the English-speaking, all poorly equipped, poorly heated, lighted, and ventilated, the congregation small and struggling, and the minister inadequately paid. It is a colorable proposition that many of these New Canadians will seek to attach themselves to a distinctively Canadian church.

7. *The spiritual argument.*—This argument cannot be ignored. It pleads not for forms or mass-movement or mechanisms, but for more abundant life, not for the dead hand but the free hand, the carrying forward of the living past into the living future; it argues for wider fellowship and for machinery adequate to a Christian brotherhood. While seeking immediate practical unity with those organizations, which are open to consider it, it turns a friendly face toward all Christian bodies everywhere in all lands, believing that the ultimate reunion will be effected not by an instantaneous avalanche at some far-distant and problematical day, but by direct action today, wherever the soil has been by fraternal relations prepared beforehand. Union thus may come not by being staged, and not by observation, but quietly like the dawn; and the speed of its breaking will be in proportion to our faith in the communion and fellowship of man with man and church with church under the guidance of the Spirit of God.

In the course of the "long-drawn-out" controversies extending over a number of years a popular vote was taken in each of the three churches, of a very satisfactory and decisive character in the Methodist and Congregational churches, but less conclusive in the Presbyterian, where the vote was broadly 70 per cent in favor, and 30 per cent against.

A second vote in the Presbyterian church was even less satisfactory, and many, irrespective of their own convictions, were afraid that to precipitate union would split the church. That view became quite pronounced at the meeting of the General Assembly held in Montreal in 1917. As a consequence a truce was called for the period of the war. When the discussion was resumed in 1921 in Toronto nearly everyone believed that the time had arrived for a decision, and with intense though suppressed interest the Assembly addressed itself to the debate. The committee in charge had framed a recommendation based on a strong desire to avoid disruption. Without a dissenting voice this committee affirmed the great and crying need of a more effective co-operation among the branches of the Christian church, and deplored rivalry. They did not break apart even at the prospect of union, but only upon the immediate step which it was thought wise for the church to take. The majority of the committee finally lined themselves behind the following resolution:

WHEREAS the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada has already by a large majority expressed itself in favor of organic union with the Methodist and Congregational Churches of Canada,

WHEREAS two appeals to the members and adherents of the Presbyterian Church in Canada have resulted in a similar way,

WHEREAS, during the time when by general agreement, the matter of union was not discussed, nothing has occurred to change the mind of the Church, but rather to confirm and strengthen its previous decision, Therefore be it

Resolved that this General Assembly take such steps as may be deemed best to consummate organic union with the above-named Churches as expeditiously as possible.

The Amendment was as follows:

WHEREAS previous assemblies in discussing the question of Organic Union with the Methodist and Congregational Churches declared that "The union of the Churches to be real and lasting must carry the consent of the entire membership," and expressed the hope of practically unanimous action within a reasonable time,

WHEREAS the question having been twice submitted to the people, the results were that only approximately one-third of the membership declared themselves in favor of Organic Union, the second vote showing increased opposition,

WHEREAS nothing has occurred during the last six years to indicate any increase in favor of Organic Union on the part of the membership,

WHEREAS the preservation of peace in the Church is necessary for the successful completion of the Forward Movement, as well as for the maintenance of the normal activities of the Church, Therefore be it

Resolved that in order to keep faith with our own people the Assembly refrain from any action that would disturb the peace, unity and progress that have so largely prevailed during the last four years; and that the Assembly at no time seek the consummation of union without a clear and unmistakable mandate from the people; and that the Assembly express its desire for cordial co-operation with all other Christian communions.

At several seditious the union debate had the full right of way, the parliamentary practice being followed that the two sides should present their cases alternately. It is but simple justice to say that, no matter what the view of the individual commissioner might have been, he was proud that the debate was carried on with such breadth of tolerance. The final result was perhaps never in much doubt, although the actual majority of four to one was a signal triumph for the union cause.

The future is not yet clear. The indications are that the minority is prepared to stand by the position assumed in the Assembly, and will make no move so long as the bounds of co-operation are not overstepped without a previous appeal to the Presbyterian people. With wisdom, patience, and forbearance Presbyterians may yet enter union as an undivided church.

So far actual conversations have embraced only the three churches already considered. However at an early stage of the *pour-parlers* Baptists and Episcopalians were invited to take part, and to the general invitation extended by a joint committee of the three churches replies were in due

time received. From the somewhat lengthy deliverance of the Baptist convention of Ontario and Quebec I make the following extracts:

1. The Baptist people rejoice in all the manifestations of mutual love among the followers of Jesus Christ, and seek on their own part to cultivate a holy fellowship with all Christians. They recognize with thankfulness the gracious operation of the Spirit of God among their brethren of other denominations, and feel themselves to be one with them in many of those things which concern the progress of the Kingdom of God on earth. At the same time they do not admit that the organic union of all Christians is an essential condition of Christian unity, or even necessarily promotive of it. For Christians who differ on questions which some of them hold to be of vital importance, it is surely better to admit the impracticability of corporate union, than to seek to compass such a union at the cost of sacrificing cherished convictions. . . .

2. The Baptist people regard all truly religious affiliations as reposing, on the one hand, on God's gracious self-communication to human souls, and, on the other hand, on each man's free acceptance of the divine grace and obedience to the divine will. As we understand the Scriptures, only those who are the subjects of such a spiritual experience are capable of participation in Christian fellowship or entitled to membership in a Christian church. Believing, therefore, in the spirituality of the Christian church, that is, that a Christian church is constituted by a voluntary union of those alone who by personal repentance and faith—not by natural birth, nor by proxy, nor by ceremony, nor by any overt act of the church—have come into fellowship with God in Christ, they do not regard the claim to ecclesiastical succession in any of its forms as a matter of concern to them. They acknowledge an historical succession from Christ and His apostles; but its nature is spiritual not ecclesiastical, coming through personal influence and the proclamation of the Gospel, not by means of forms, rites, or ceremonies.

3. The same principle prevents them from admitting knowingly to church membership any except those who have been spiritually renewed. Thus they cannot regard the children of Christian parents as entitled by birth or membership in a Christian household to a place in a Christian church or as a proper subject of its ordinances. It cannot be granted that the Christian ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper convey in any sense to their recipients the spiritual grace which they symbolize, for they have meaning and value only as they express the faith and grace already possessed by those who in these acts of obedience confess their

relation to Christ. Hence the practice of infant baptism and the consequences which follow it are a fatal impediment to organic union between the Baptist and the Paedo-Baptist churches. Hence also the impossibility of Baptists consenting to an alteration of the original mode of baptism, because without the immersion its representation of the believer's union with Christ in His death and resurrection is lost. Further, the doctrine of the spirituality of the Christian church demands that it avoid all alliance with secular authorities. Such alliances have been fruitful of evil. . . .

4. It is because of these principles which represent to them the divine will that the Baptists find it necessary to maintain a separate organized existence. In relation to these matters they can make no compromise, but feel themselves under a divinely imposed obligation to propagate their views throughout the world.¹

From this pronouncement, which was intended to close out all prospect of organic union, the Baptist churches in Canada have not receded, and union is accordingly not above the horizon.

The latest contribution to the question of organic union in Canada is the action taken at Hamilton, Canada, by the Church of England in Canada regarding the "Appeal for Reunion," issued by the Lambeth Conference in 1920 in London. In this appeal it is proposed that mutual reordination be arranged for, thus enabling a clergyman from either side to minister fully to the people of the whole united church. The exact wording is as follows:

We believe that for all, the truly equitable approach to union is by the way of mutual deference to one another's consciences. To this end, we who send forth this appeal would say that if the authorities of other communions would so desire, we are persuaded that, terms of union having been otherwise satisfactorily adjusted, Bishops and clergy of our communion would willingly accept from these authorities a form of commission or recognition which would commend our ministry to their congregations, as having its place in the one family life. It is not in our power to know how far this suggestion may be acceptable to those to whom we offer it. We can only say that we offer it in all sincerity as

¹ *Report of the General Assembly's Committee on Union with Other Churches.* Toronto: Murray Printing Co. (1908), pp. 8-9.

a token of our longing that all ministries of grace, theirs and ours, shall be available for the service of our Lord in a united church.

It is our hope that the same motive would lead ministers who have not received it to accept a commission through episcopal ordination, as obtaining for them a ministry throughout the whole fellowship.¹

This very earnest and interesting proposal has a background. In the year 1908, in answer to an invitation of the three churches then conducting negotiations to the Church of England in Canada to participate in these negotiations, the reply was made that the Church of England in Canada was prepared to confer with other churches on the basis of what is known as the Lambeth Quadrilateral. This basis involves the acceptance of the authority of the Holy Scriptures, the creed commonly called Nicene, the divinely instituted sacraments of Baptism and the Holy Communion, and the Historic Episcopate. The three churches, while gladly recognizing the cordial and brotherly spirit of the communication from the Bishops, rightly or wrongly regarded this reply as assenting to a limited conference only, since episcopal ordination was insisted on as a necessary prerequisite.² The Bishops felt, no doubt, that they had no other recourse than to present the four Lambeth fundamentals.

Thirteen years later, however, at Lambeth the Bishops modified their position, and now suggest the possibility of some form of mutual ordination. It is idle perhaps to speculate as to what will be the outcome of this new and hospitable attitude of the Church of England in Canada. It is, doubtless, a genuine effort of the Church of England to realize its vision of a world-church. An influential committee of the Methodist church has issued the following resolutions:

With regard to a yet wider and more inclusive union of churches we recall the resolution of the Winnipeg Conference in 1902, originally

¹ *Conference of Bishops of the Anglican Communion*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; New York: The Macmillan Co. (1920), p. 135.

² *Proceedings of the Fifth Conference of the Joint Committee on Church Union*. Printed privately by the Committee. Toronto (1908), pp. 6-7, 19.

declaring itself "in favor of a measure of organic unity wide enough to embrace all evangelical denominations in Canada," and adopting the present negotiations as the most practicable step towards that end. We have noted the appeal of the Lambeth Conference to all Christian people, and record our appreciation of the sincerity and depth of Christian feeling therein expressed. We recognize that this appeal indicates a solemn realization of the responsibility resting upon all Christian communions to express the unity of the spirit in one body, as well as in righteousness in life.

We respectfully record our experience that the most fruitful results of such negotiations have been found when the bodies concerned are untrammelled by pre-established formulas. We are of opinion that in intimate and sympathetic consideration the spirit common to all would find an expression more adequate than can be provided by the proposals of any one communion. We believe that it is the duty of all Christian bodies both to discover and to express this common spirit. We believe that our church would welcome such a development of Christian fellowship and intercourse between the Church of England and ourselves as would not delay the consummation of the union now pending, but would prepare the way for a more inclusive union.¹

This decision does not diverge greatly from the finding of the joint committee of the three negotiating churches in 1908, when they declared their willingness and eagerness to meet the Church of England on "free and equal terms."²

It is more than probable that no basis for union or reunion can be regarded as satisfactory, if reservations are made and positions laid down beforehand. But it is widely admitted that the action of the Church of England has made the general question more fluid, and, while it can hardly be advisable to interrupt the union movement, now so long under way, men of wisdom and wide charity have a superb opportunity to blaze the trail for a joint effort in the not-too-distant future to give shape to organized Christianity in Canada.

Such a consummation would be in keeping with the recorded action of the negotiating churches. As early as September,

¹ Quoted from a newspaper report.

² *Proceedings of the Fifth Conference of the Joint Committee on Church Union*, p. 19.

1902, the General Conference of the Methodist Church in Canada had explicitly resolved that it would regard with great gratification a movement looking toward organic union of Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists "in no spirit of exclusiveness toward others not named,"¹ and in December, 1908, as a Christmas gift to Christianity in Canada the joint committee, in one of its last acts, decided that it would have been glad "to welcome to their conference representatives of other Christian communions, and, although this widening of the conference has not yet been found practicable, they hope that, in the event of a union of the negotiating churches, a still more comprehensive union may in the future be realized."

The way may not be, and is not, yet wide open; but it is not blocked.

¹ *Explanatory Statement*. Toronto: Murray Printing Co. (1906), p. 6.